

30 Crisis Management: A Challenge in Institutions of Higher Learning in Kenya

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1 Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate how crises are managed in institutions of higher learning in Kenya. The objectives of the study were: to find out the different types of crises anticipated by the organisation, to establish the strategic actions used in the organisation to prepare for crises, and to determine the elements in the organisation's crises management plan. A Case Study Design was used. The sample size was ten managers including public relations practitioners. Interview Schedules and Document Analysis were used as instruments for data collection. The study revealed that managers in the institution do not use a proactive approach to crises management. They lack knowledge about strategic actions such as integrating crises management into strategic planning process, integrating crises management into statements of corporate excellence, creating crises management teams and including outsiders on the board. The organisation did not have a crisis management plan. The researcher recommends that: Competent public relations officers should be employed to perform all functions including crises management. Training and workshops in crises management should be provided to strategic managers and public relations practitioners. Managers should use strategic actions such as integrating crises management into strategic planning process, integrating crises management into statements of corporate excellence, creating crises management teams and including outsiders on the board. A location to act as a crisis management centre should be identified. Organisational members should be exposed to crisis simulations.

2 Introduction

A crisis is a catastrophe that may occur in any organisation. It may be due to natural, as a result of human error or due to malevolent actions (Argenti, 2003). Crises lead to the destruction of lives, loss of assets or an organisation's credibility. They occur when the management least expect. In most cases, the managers of the affected organisation may have very insufficient information about it. The corporate image of the organisation is likely to be punctured if there are flaws in crises management. It puts strategic managers under intense scrutiny as they become the subject of the media spotlight. It is a discipline within the broader context of management consisting of skills and techniques required to assess, understand, and cope with any serious situation, especially from the moment it first occurs to the point that recovery procedures start. A crisis is a major, unpredictable event that threatens to harm the purpose of this study organisation and its stakeholders. Crises can affect all segments of society – businesses, churches, educational institutions, families, and the Government. They are caused by a wide range of reasons. Although the definitions can vary greatly, three elements are common to most definitions of crisis: a threat to the organisation, the element of surprise, and a short decision time. The practice of crisis management involves attempts to eliminate technological failures as well as the development of formal communication systems to avoid or to manage crisis situations.

3 Statement of the Problem

Education shapes the destiny of a nation (Gichunuku, 2005). In Kenya, education is considered fundamental to the success of Vision 2030 (Kenya Vision 2030 Research Team 2007). The quality of education system has a bearing on the quality of managers in the learning institutions. The Government of Kenya at all levels – local and national – has played a large role in crisis management. Emergency services such as fire and police departments at the local level, and national level, often play integral roles in crisis situations. Higher learning institutions in Kenya have not been an exception in experiencing crises. They experience technological crises, confrontation crises, crises of malevolence, strikes, fires, and fraudulent activities, among others. Recently, Kenyatta University students went on strike and destroyed assets, worth millions and led to loss of lives (Mayaka and Kumba, 2009). The stakeholders are expecting the learning institution to be opened as soon as possible. It all depends on the credibility of the strategic managers in managing the current crisis. In the face of crisis, leaders must deal with the strategic challenges they face, the political risks and opportunities they encounter, the errors they make, the pitfalls they need to avoid, and the paths away from crisis they may pursue. The necessity for management is even more significant (Boin, A., Hart, P., and Stern, E., 2005).

4 Research Objectives

1. To find out the different types of crises anticipated by the organisation.
2. To establish the strategic actions used in the organisation to prepare for crises.
3. To determine the elements in the organisation's crises management plan.

5 Literature Review

Types of Crises

1. Natural disasters

They are caused by natural factors such as hurricanes, earthquakes or storms.

2. Technological crises

With the introduction of computers and computerising operations in organisations, when technology fails, it has catastrophic consequences. It can affect all records in the organisation, cause accidents, distort or interfere with communication or cause death; especially in hospital settings.

3. Crises of malevolence

They are caused by the malicious intent or actions of people such as terrorist attacks.

4. Crises of management failure

They are as a result of managers failing to perform their formal responsibilities (Argenti, 2003).

5. Smouldering crisis

In smouldering crisis problems or issues that start out small and could be fixed or averted if someone was paying attention or recognised the potential for trouble.

6. Bizarre crisis

Such as like finding a finger in a restaurant meal.

7. Perceptual crisis

Such as the long-running problem Proctor and Gamble used to have with their former corporate logo that included a half-moon and stars, which critics would claim were symbols of devil-worship, calling for boycotts of Proctor and Gamble products. Others are accidents, strikes, sudden resignations, fires outbreaks, discovery of fraudulent activities, and many more.

6 A Proactive Approach to Crises Management

Successfully diffusing a crisis requires an understanding of how to handle a crisis before it occurs. As managers take significant time strategising on how to achieve business or academic objectives according to the organisation's vision and mission, the same vigour ought to be used in planning for crises. They should not wait to use a reactive approach. They ought to integrate crises management into strategic planning processes and statements of corporate excellence. The way teams are vital in performing varied organisational tasks, strategic planners should come up with various crises management teams with clearly defined team tasks, should a crisis occur. Training and workshops in crises management should be provided. All organisational members should be involved in crises simulations. This can transform the organisation from being crisis prone to being crisis prepare (Pearson and Mitroff, 1993).

7 Elements of a Crisis Management Plan

Organisations should have crises management plans composed of:

1. **A senior management multidisciplinary crisis committee.** It should include legal public relations, technical and other experts needed for the anticipated catastrophes. The varied experts in the committee are meant to provide a broad range of professional skills, centralise all sources of information and make appropriate decisions. The crises management committee should have the authority to make major decisions and come up with solutions (Laurence, 2000). There should be other teams assigned to handle different crises should they occur.
2. **A centralised approach to corporate communication should be planned for.** The crises management committee ought to decide on a crises management communication centre. All information during the crisis should go through the communications centre for consistency.
3. **A competent spokesperson selected by the management is given significant authority to perform the expected responsibilities.** The spokesperson ensures that information flow continuously during the crisis, reduces the likelihood of the company contradicting itself and media relations are well handled. It is a moment when the organisation needs the media so much to show the credibility of the management in handling the crisis and protect the organisation's corporate image.
4. **Communication Objectives should be outlined in the plan.** There should be a list of whom to notify during a crisis. Direct communication tools are used for audiences considered very important to the organisation. In institutions of higher learning, it may include employees directly affected by the crisis, students, their family members, top managers not on the crisis committee, managers at all other levels, union representatives, medical and security personnel. Other stakeholders such as local, provincial and national authorities should be contacted directly. There should be organised direct communication systems including hot lines, letters, teleconference and personal visits.
5. **Stakeholders who can create a positive attitude towards the organisation during the crisis should be informed continuously.** They include government officials, clients, community leaders, and public interest groups (Argenti 2002). The role of the media or its mission should be well understood by the management. All media houses will want to get the story first with victims, villains and visuals.

8 Communicating During Crises

Although many managers are involved in crises management, the role of public relations practitioners is pivotal. The chief executive officer is involved in developing general strategies for communication. It is therefore important to have an appropriate structure for corporate communication function. The senior most communications manager should report directly to the CEO. The credibility and reputation of organisations is heavily influenced by the extent of their active and consistent responses during crisis situations. The organisation and communication involved in responding to a crisis in a timely fashion makes for a challenge in businesses. There must be open and consistent communication throughout the hierarchy to contribute to a successful crisis communication process (Ian, 2005). The management should create a consistent emergency alert format to reach geographically and linguistically diverse audiences through both audio and visual mediums (Hellsloot, 2007).

9 Benefits of Crisis Management

Ability to assess the situation from inside and outside the institution as all stakeholders might perceive it.

1. Techniques to direct actions to contain the likely or perceived damage spread.
2. Better institutional resilience for all stakeholders.
3. Compliance with regulatory and ethical requirements, for example, corporate social responsibility.
4. Much better management of serious incidents or any incident that could become serious.
5. Improved staff awareness of their roles and expectations within the institution.
6. Increased ability, confidence and morale within the institution.
7. Enhanced risk management insofar that obvious risks will be identified, mitigated (where possible) and through crisis and business continuity management - as prepared for (Coombs, 2008).

10 Methodology

A Case Study Research Design was used. The design enabled the researchers to have smaller samples that facilitated in-depth investigations. The Case Study Research Design generally entails intensive, descriptive and holistic analysis of a single entity. The design enabled the researchers to study a single entity in depth in order to gain insight into the other cases (Oso and Onen 2005). Most case studies are based on the premise that a case can be located that is typical of many other cases (Mugenda and Mugenda 2003). The target population was ten strategic managers including the CEO. The sample size was all the ten managers because of the small target population. The commonly used techniques for data collection in a case study are: *Observations, Interview and Document Analysis* (Robson, 2002). The researchers used *Interview Schedules and Document Analysis* as data collection instruments.

11 Findings and Discussions

11.1 Types of Crisis Anticipated by the Organisation

Data from the interview schedule revealed that managers were of the opinion that the organisation can be affected by all types of crises. The ones that can significantly affect the institution according to their response are fire outbreaks (80%) and strikes (90%) as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Types of Crisis Anticipated by the Organisation.

Type of Crisis	Degree of Occurrence
Natural Disasters	20%
Technological crises	10%
Crises of Malevolence	20%
Crises of Management Failure	30%
Smouldering Bizarre crisis	5%
Perceptual crisis	5%
Fire outbreak	80%
Strikes	90%

11.2 Strategic Actions Used in the Organisation to Prepare for Crises

Data from the interview revealed that most managers were of the opinion that the strategic actions the institution can use to prepare for crises are: to avail contacts for emergency services such as fire and police departments, and effective communication as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Strategic Actions Used in the Organisation to Prepare for Crises.

Strategic Action	Frequency
Avail police hot line number	98%
Avail fire department number	93%
Install fire extinguishers	93%
Effective Communication	50%

11.3 Elements in the Organisation's Crises Management Plan

Data from document analysis revealed that the organisations did not have a crises management plan. They do not have a list of whom to notify in an emergency, have no approach to media relations, no strategy for notifying employees, no location to serve as a crisis headquarters should a crisis occur and no idea on how to communicate during crisis.

12 Conclusions

Managers in the institution do not use a proactive approach to crises management. They wait to react to crises situations using the emergency services of the police and fire fighters. Their anticipation for crises is influenced by the recurrent situations. They lack knowledge about strategic actions such as integrating crises management into strategic planning process, integrating crises management into statements of corporate excellence, creating crises management teams and including outsiders on the board. Their lack of preparedness is evident as they had no crises management plan.

13 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher recommends that:

1. Competent public relations officers should be employed to perform all functions including crises management.
2. Training and workshops in crises management should be provided to strategic managers and public relations practitioners.
3. Managers should use strategic actions such as integrating crises management into strategic planning process, **Integrating Crises Management** into statements of corporate excellence, creating crises management teams and including outsiders on the board.
4. A location to act as a crisis management centre should be identified.
5. Organisational members should be exposed to crisis simulations.

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